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Āvartan: The Principle of Cyclic Time in Indian Classical Music

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Abstract

In Indian classical music, the basic unit of rhythmic time is not a bar or a beat but a cycle- the Āvartan. This paper argues that the Āvartan is not merely a technical device for organising time. It is the musical form of a conviction held across the Indian philosophical tradition: that time is cyclic by nature, and that every cycle passes through the same three-phase structure of creation, sustenance, and return - Sṛṣṭi, Sthiti, and Laya. The philosophical ground is established through Ādi Śaṅkarācārya's Vivekacūḍāmaṇi, which defines Laya as the return of the apparent world to its undivided source. Śārṅgadeva's Saṅgītaratnākara confirms this by naming Laya among the ten vital principles (Prāṇas) of Tāla - the quality that allows the rhythmic cycle to renew at every Sam rather than merely repeat. The paper reads the internal categories of Tāla - Mātrā, Theka, Vibhāga, Tāli, Khāli, and Sam - as expressions of this triadic structure. Sam, the arrival point of the Āvartan, is the place where Laya in its Vedāntic sense is most directly felt in music: dissolution and renewal as a single act. The argument is extended to the three branches of Saṅgīt - Gāyan, Vādana, and Nartana - with Layakārī as the shared practice through which each inhabits the cyclic principle. The paper is grounded in the Guru-Śiṣya Paramparā and in classical textual sources.

Keywords: *Āvartan, Tāla, cyclic time, Sṛṣṭi-Sthiti-Laya, Laya, Vivekacūḍāmaṇi, Tāla - Prāṇas, Sam, Punarjanma, Laya kārī, Saṅgīt, Hindustāni classical music, Guru-Śiṣya Paramparā.*

1. Introduction

In a Hindustāni classical music performance, there is a moment every musician and attentive listener knows by feel: the cycle completes itself. A *Tablā* player lands a *Tihāī*; a vocalist arrives at the *Sam* of a long *bandish*; a Kathak dancer plants the foot at the close of a *tatkar* sequence. The moment is felt not because a count has ended but because something has returned - returned to the point from which it departed, closing a circle that was always seeking to close. This moment is *Sam*. The cycle that returns to it is the *Āvartan*.

What kind of thing is a cycle? Why should musical time in Indian classical performing arts be organised around return rather than progression? These are not questions that music theory alone can answer. They point to something deeper - a conviction held across the Vedāntic, Purāṇic, and Āgamic traditions that cyclicity is not one property that time happens to have. It is the nature of time itself. Things arise, persist, and return to their source; from that source, they arise again. This three-phase movement is named *Sṛṣṭi, Sthiti,* and *Laya* - creation, sustenance, and dissolution. (G. Rajarajeshwari, 2020)

The word that names the third phase - *Laya* - is the same word that names the living pulse of a *Tāla*. That is not a coincidence of vocabulary. It is the key to the argument this paper makes: the *Āvartan* is not a technical device for dividing time. It is the audible form of a conviction about what time is.

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This paper is grounded in practice and transmission within the *Guru-Śiṣya* paramparā, brought into dialogue with classical texts. A guiding observation from within the *Paramparā* frames the inquiry: *Sam* functions in *Tāl Śāstra* as *Ṣaḍja* functions in *Gāyan* Śāstra. Just as *Ṣaḍja* is the ground-tone to which all melodic movement returns - the centre whose absence destabilizes the *Rāga* - *Sam* is the ground-point of the rhythmic cycle. Both express the same principle: in Indian musical thought, meaning in time is constituted by return.

2. The Cyclic Nature of Time: Philosophical Ground of *Āvartan*

2.1 Laya: The Word That Connects Philosophy and Music

The word *Laya* carries two meanings that sit at the heart of this paper. In Indian philosophy, *Laya* means the return of the manifest world to its source - the dissolution of what has arisen back into the ground from which it came. In music, *Laya* means tempo - the living pulse of the rhythmic cycle. These are not two unrelated uses of the same word. They point to the same idea: that what appears to end is actually returning to its ground, and from that ground, it arises again.

Ādi Śaṅkarācārya, in the *Vivekacūḍāmaṇi*, describes this ground - the unmanifest (avyakta) - as the source from which the entire manifest world arises:

> *avyaktaṃ nāma parameśaśaktiḥ anādyavidyā triguṇātmikā parā* |
>
> *kāryānumeyā sudhiyaiva māyā yayā jagatsarvamidaṃ prasūyate* ||
>
> (The Unmanifest is the supreme power of the Lord... known to the wise only through its effects; it is that by which this entire world is brought forth.) - *Vivekacūḍāmaṇi* 110 (Gharat, 1914)

The world of name and form arises from this unmanifest ground. When it dissolves back into it, that is *Laya*. This dissolution is not destruction. Nothing is lost. The world returns to the source it never truly left, and from that source it arises again. *Laya* is therefore not an ending. It is a return - and every return carries within it the seed of the next arising.

This is the sense in which *Laya* connects philosophy to music. The rhythmic cycle of the *Āvartan* moves, sustains itself, and returns to *Sam*. That return is *Laya* - in both senses at once.

2.2 Laya as Tāla -Prāṇa: Śārṅgadeva's Musical Confirmation

The same word - *Laya* - appears in a different but directly related context in Śārṅgadeva's *Saṅgītaratnākara* (c. 13th century CE), the most comprehensive medieval Indian treatise on music. In the fifth chapter, on Tāla, Śārṅgadeva enumerates the ten *Prāṇas* of Tāla - the ten vital life-forces without which a rhythm has no life:

> *kālo mārgaḥ kriyāṅgāni graho jātiḥ kalā Laya ḥ* |
>
> *yatiḥ prastāra ityete daśa prāṇāsTāla gatāḥ* ||
>
> (Kāla, mārga, kriyā, aṅga, graha, jāti, kalā, *Laya*, yati, and prastāra - these ten are the *Prāṇas* of Tāla.) - *Saṅgītaratnākara* 5.2 (Chaudhari, 2000)

Śārṅgadeva calls *Laya* a *Prāṇa* - a breath, a vital force. This means *Laya* is not just a measurement of speed. It is what keeps the *Tāla* alive. Without steady *Laya*, the cycle loses its shape and falls apart. With it, the cycle breathes - and when it arrives at *Sam*, that arrival feels like a genuine completion, not just the end of a count. Śārṅgadeva goes further, defining precisely where this pulse lives:

> *kriyānantaraviśrāntirLaya ityabhidhīyate* |
>
> *sa tridhā drutamadhyādivilambatvaprabhedataḥ* ||

(*Laya* is defined as the interval of rest [viśrānti] that immediately follows an action [kriyā]. It is of three kinds: fast, medium, and slow.) - *Saṅgītaratnākara* 5.44 (Chaudhari, 2000)

This definition reveals something important. Śārṅgadeva is saying that the life of rhythm does not live in the beat itself - it lives in the silence after it. The beat strikes, and then there is a moment of rest before the next beat. That rest is *Laya*. It is the space in which the cycle breathes.

This connects directly to the Vedāntic understanding established in section 2.1. Just as the manifest world dissolves back into its source before arising again, the rhythmic pulse dissolves into stillness before the next beat. Both are the same movement: action, rest, renewal. The rest is not empty. It is where return happens - and return is what makes the next arising possible.

A musician who holds *Laya* steadily is therefore not simply keeping good time. They are maintaining the condition under which the cycle can complete itself and begin again. Without that stillness between beats, there is no true cycle - only a mechanical sequence of strikes.

2.3 Sṛṣṭi, Sthiti, Laya: The Structure of Every Cycle

The *Laya* that Śaṅkarācārya describes - return to the unmanifest source - is the third phase of a movement that the Purāṇic and Āgamic traditions name as *Sṛṣṭi, Sthiti,* and *Laya*: creation, sustenance, and dissolution. These three phases are not a one-time cosmic event. They describe the structure of every cycle, at every scale. Anything that comes into being, persists for a time, and returns to its source enacts this triad.

This connects directly to what was established in section 2.2. Śārṅgadeva's definition of *Laya* as *Viśrānti* - the interval of rest after the beat - is precisely the third phase of this triad at the scale of a single rhythmic pulse. The beat arises (*Sṛṣṭi*), sustains its sound (*Sthiti*), and dissolves into stillness (*Laya*). The next beat then arises from that stillness. The triadic structure is not only cosmic - it is present in every single *Mātrā*.

Srṣṭi is creation - the moment things emerge and begin to take shape. The *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* explains that this first movement begins with *Nāda*, the primordial sound that is the first vibration of the manifest world (Bhāgavata Purāṇa 3.26.32–33). Because the universe and music both originate from the same sound, music does not merely imitate creation; it participates in it. *Sthiti* is sustenance - the process of holding the manifest world in being, maintaining its form across time. *Laya* is the return to the source. As the tradition repeatedly emphasises, *Laya* is not a terminus. After *Laya*, the world arises again. The cycle does not end; it renews itself.

2.4 The Āvartan as Sṛṣṭi-Sthiti-Laya Made Audible

With this philosophical ground in place, the *Āvartan* reveals itself as more than an arrangement of beats. Every rhythmic cycle enacts the same three phases:

- **Sṛṣṭi (Creation)** - The cycle begins at *Sam*, born out of the ending of the previous cycle.
- **Sthiti (Sustenance)** - The cycle unfolds and sustains itself through its inner structure - the *Mātrā s,* then the *Theka, Vibhāgas, Tālis,* and *Khālis*. This is the living interior in which all musical material takes shape.
- ***Laya* (Dissolution and Return)** - The rhythm gathers toward its completion, returning to the next *Sam*, where the cycle dissolves into its source and is reborn in the same instant.

The *Viṣṇu Purāṇa*'s description of the *Kālacakra* - the wheel of time (Dutt, 2009) - is therefore not a poetic metaphor for what the *Āvartan* does. It is a description of the same reality. By organising time into repeating cycles, Indian classical music gives this philosophical conviction an audible form. The *Āvartan* is cosmic truth turned into sound.

2.5 Sound as the Path of Return: The Yoga Tārāvalī's Insight

If *Sṛṣṭi* begins with sound, the philosophical tradition also tells us that the return - *Laya* is most directly reached through sound. Ādi Śaṅkarācārya, in the Yoga Tārāvalī, writes:

> *sadāśivoktāni sapādalakṣa-layāvadhānāni vasanti loke* |
>
> *nādānusandhānasamādhimekaṃ manyāmahe mānyatamaṃ layānām* ||
>
> (Lord Sadāśiva has described a hundred and twenty-five thousand methods of achieving *Laya*. Of all these, we hold the path of meditation on primordial sound - nādānusandhāna - to be the most supreme.) - (Bhattacharya, 1987)

This verse makes a remarkable claim: of all the ways in which consciousness can return to its source, sound is the most direct path. And within Indian classical music, it is the *Āvartan* - the cyclic structure of *Tāla*- that makes this possible in practice.

If musical time moved only forward in a straight line, the mind would follow it outward, always tracking what comes next, never settling. In Vedāntic terms, this outward movement is *Pravṛtti* - the dispersal of consciousness away from its centre. The *Āvartan* works in the opposite way. Its entire structure is built on return. The pull of *Sam* draws the musician's attention back, again and again, to the same point. With each cycle, the mind is gathered rather than scattered. The *Āvartan* does not merely organise time. It trains the practitioner, through repetition, in the experience of dissolution and renewal - until the cycle and the musician's awareness become one.

3. Āvartan: The Geometry of the Musical Cycle

The word *Āvartan* comes from the Sanskrit root √vṛt - to turn, to revolve - combined with the prefix ā-, which draws the turning back upon itself. It does not simply mean a rotation. It means a turning that returns to where it began.

Two related words illuminate what this means. Āvarta is a whirlpool - water that moves outward, curves, and is pulled back into its own centre. The whirlpool does not flow away; it continuously returns to the point around which it turns. *Pravṛtti* and *Nivṛtti*, from the same root, describe the two fundamental movements of consciousness in Vedāntic thought - *Pravṛtti* is the outward movement of the self into the world, and *Nivṛtti* is its return inward toward the source.

What connects these three is a single idea: departure and return to centre. In *Āvarta*, it happens in water. In *Pravṛtti* - *Nivṛtti*, it happens in consciousness. In the *Āvartan*, it happens in musical time. The Tāla moves away from *Sam* through its interior and is drawn back to it - just as the whirlpool curves back to its centre, just as *Nivṛtti* draws consciousness back to its source. (Aksharananddas Swami, 2022)

This shared principle has consequences for what the *Āvartan* is. The cycle is not simply a span of time with a beginning and an end. It is a movement of departure and return, in which what has gone out must come back. The turning is not optional; it is the defining act. Without the return, there is no *Āvartan* - only a stretch of time that has started and stopped. With the return, time takes on a different character: it becomes shaped, oriented, complete. *Āvartan*, therefore, does not borrow a neutral geometric term to describe a musical structure. It carries a philosophical inheritance. The cycle is called *Āvartan* because it enacts the same principle of return that the tradition already recognises at every other scale of existence.

3.1 Mātrā: The Pulse of the Cycle

The *Mātrā* is conventionally described as the unit of measurement in *Tāla* - the smallest division of rhythmic time. This definition, while accurate, misses what the *Mātrā* actually is. A *Mātrā* in isolation is only a duration. A *Mātrā* within an *Āvartan* is something more: it is the smallest living pulse of the cycle, carrying within it the orientation of the whole. Every *Mātrā*, so to speak, knows where it stands in relation to Sam - how far it

has come from the last arrival, how close it is to the next. The *Mātrā* is not a measurement of time. It is the cycle alive in its smallest form.

The *Mātrā* also determines the scale of the cycle. *Tīntāl* has sixteen *Mātrās*; *Jhaptāl* has ten; *Ektāl* twelve; *Rūpak* seven. The number of *Mātrās* fixes the length of a single *Āvartan*. But the *Mātrā* count alone does not make a *Tāla*. Two *Tālas* can share the same *Mātrā* count and still be entirely different in character and identity. What distinguishes them is what is placed within those *Mātrās* - the *Theka*.

3.2 Theka: The Sounded Identity of the Cycle

Once the *Mātrā* count is established, the *Tāla* takes shape through the *Theka* - the characteristic pattern of *bols*, or mnemonic syllables, that gives the cycle its sonic form. *Tīntāl* is not simply sixteen *Mātrās*; it is the specific sequence *dhā dhin dhin dhā* | *dhā dhin dhin dhā* | *dhā tin tin tā* | *tā dhin dhin dhā*. *Jhaptāl* is not merely ten mātrās; it is *dhin nā* | *dhin dhin nā* | *tin nā* | *dhin dhin nā*. Every *Tāla* has its *Theka*, and the *Theka* is how the *Tāla* lives in sound.

The *Theka* is not an ornament placed upon the *Mātrās*. It is the sonic identity of the cycle. When a listener recognises *Tīntāl*, they are not counting to sixteen. They are hearing the *Theka*. The structural analysis that follows - is extracted from the *Theka* through practice.

In the framework of this paper, the *Theka* is the cycle made audible at its simplest. *Sṛṣṭi, Sthiti,* and *Laya* are already present within it: the *Theka* sounds, it sustains, it returns to *Sam*. Before any elaboration takes place, the *Theka* is already enacting the full philosophical structure of the *Āvartan*.

3.3 Vibhāga: Sustaining the Cycle's Interior

The internal divisions of the cycle - its *Vibhāgas* - become visible through the *Theka*. They are not abstract groupings imposed upon the *Mātrās*. They are the natural sections that the *Theka* itself reveals through its shifts in sonic character. Tīntāl falls into four *Vibhāgas* of four *Mātrā* s each and this fourfold division is evident in the way the *bols* group in its theka. *Jhaptāl's* structure is heard as four distinct phrases in its *Theka*. *Rūpak's* 3+2+2 is shaped by how its *bols* cluster.

If the cycle were internally uniform - if every mātrā carried the same weight and the same bol - the *Sam* would be indistinguishable from any other pulse, and the cycle would have no direction. *Vibhāga* creates the interior landscape of the cycle. In the framework established in Section 2, *Vibhāga* is the musical enactment of *Sthiti*. It sustains the differentiated interior of the *Āvartan* across the span of the cycle, giving each *Tāla* its specific way of holding musical time in a living shape.

3.4 Tāli and Khāli: Affirmation and Withdrawal

The *Tāli* (clap) and *Khāli* (wave) are gestures that mark which sections of the cycle affirm and which withdraw. But these are not abstract categories imposed upon the cycle. They become legible only through the *Theka* itself, where the distinction between affirmation and withdrawal is already audible in the *Bols*.

The traditional understanding of *Khāli* is not the absence of accent but the presence of deliberate withdrawal. It is the moment at which the cycle's energy recedes, creating the space within which the return to *Sam* can be felt as a genuine arrival. The structural necessity of *Khāli* follows from the *Sṛṣṭi-Sthiti-Laya* framework. For *Laya* to be felt - for the dissolution and return at *Sam* to register - there must be a prior withdrawal. In *Tīntāl*, the *Khāli* at the ninth *Mātrā* interrupts the accumulation of the three preceding *Tāli* sections and creates an opening in the cycle's interior through which the approach to *Sam* can gather force. *Sam* is the cycle's affirmation; *Khāli* is its necessary counterweight.

Read together, *Mātrā*, *Theka, Vibhāga*, *Tāli*, and *Khāli* are not components assembled to create a cycle. They are the ways in which the cycle organises itself from within. They unfold from one another. The *Mātrā* sets the scale; the *Theka* gives the cycle its sounded identity; the *Vibhāgas* emerge as the *Theka's* natural sections; the *Tāli* and *Khāli* are heard within those sections as the alternation of affirmation and withdrawal. *Tāla* is not a grid imposed on time. It is time taking the shape of a cycle.

3.5. Sam: The Point of Arrival and Rebirth

Sam - from the Sanskrit *sama*, meaning even, equal, complete - is the point at which the *Āvartan* arrives at itself. According to Bhatkhande's notation system, *Sam* is marked as the first beat of the cycle. This is useful for learning, but it gives the impression that *Sam* is where the music starts - a downbeat, a point of departure. The understanding within the *Paramparā* is different. *Sam* is where the cycle arrives. Every phrase, every elaboration, every *Tihāī* is moving toward it. The cycle does not begin at *Sam* and unfold forward. It approaches *Sam* from every direction and comes home.

This arrival is something every musician and listener feels. As a *Tihāī* approaches its last beat, the attention in the room tightens. At *Sam* - the nod, the shared breath, the raised hand - something is felt that is bigger than a count reaching one. A circle has closed. This is not a formal convention. It is the natural response to completion and renewal happening at the same moment.

That moment - completion and renewal as one - is exactly what the *Sṛṣṭi-Sthiti-Laya* framework describes. At *Sam*, *Laya* and *Sṛṣṭi* are not two events one after the other. They are one event. The cycle dissolves into its source and rises again in the same instant. The *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* puts it simply: *Sṛṣṭi* is the exhalation, *Laya* is the inhalation. The *Āvartan* breathes. *Sam* is the still point between the two breaths.

To train in *Tāla* within the *Paramparā* is to develop the sensitivity to feel this - not just that the count has reached one, but that the cycle has come home, and that from that homecoming, everything begins again.

What emerges from this chapter is a single picture. The *Āvartan is a turning that returns, and everything within it* - the *Mātrā,* The *Theka,* The *Vibhāga,* The *Tāli,* The *Khāli,* and the *Sam - participates in that return.* Each element unfolds from the one before it: the *Mātrā* sets the scale, the *Theka* gives the cycle its sonic form, the *Vibhāgas* emerge within the theka, the *Tāli* and *Khāli* alternate within the *Vibhāgas,* and all of it moves toward *Sam.* What began in chapter 2 as a philosophical conviction about the nature of time is now visible as a musical structure. The cycle is not imposed on the music; the music takes the shape of the cycle. The *Āvartan* is the philosophical principle of return, given sound, shape, and direction.

4. Āvartan in Saṅgīt: *Gāyan*, *Vādana*, and Nartana

4.1 Saṅgīt as Triple Unity

Śārṅgadeva opens the *Saṅgītaratnākara* with a definition that has shaped Indian musicological thought ever since:

> *gītaṃ vādyaṃ tathā nṛtyaṃ trayaṃ saṅgītamucyate* |
>
> (Vocal music, instrumental music, and dance — these three together are called saṅgīt.) - *Saṅgītaratnākara* 1.21 (Chaudhari, 2000)

These are not three separate arts that happen to share a name. They are three expressions of a single principle - one that governs all three equally: *Svara* (melody), *Tāla* (rhythm), and *Bhāva* (expression). The word *Saṅgīt* comes from the prefix *saṃ* - meaning together, completely - and the root √*gai*, to sing. It names not singing alone but the complete act of musical expression, in which voice, instrument, and body are understood as one. Śārṅgadeva's definition is therefore not a classification. It is a statement about the nature of music itself: that music is whole only when all three are present.

This matters because the *Āvartan* is not a feature of any one branch of *Saṅgīt*. It is the common ground on which all three stand. The vocalist, the instrumentalist, and the dancer inhabit the *Āvartan* in different ways - with different bodies, different technical vocabularies, different expressive forms. But all three are enacting the same cyclic structure. The cycle turns, sustains itself, and returns to *Sam*. That is as true for the dancer's foot as it is for the singer's phrase or the sitār's gat. The *Āvartan* underlies all three because it is not a musical convention. It is the form that time takes in Indian classical music - and *Saṅgīt*, in all its branches, is the art of inhabiting that form.

4.2 Layakārī: The Practice of Inhabiting the Cycle

The *Āvartan* establishes the broad boundary of musical time. *Layakārī* is the active exploration that the musician undertakes strictly within this boundary, playing with intricate subdivisions of the pulse before inevitably returning to the center or the *Sam*. It is the art of rhythmic elaboration within the cycle: dividing the *Mātrā* into proportional subdivisions - double (*dugun*), triple (*tigun*), quadruple (*caugun*), and the more complex fractional ratios of *Āḍ* (3:2), *Kuāḍ* (5:4), and *Biāḍ* (7:4) - and building phrases that stretch across multiple *Āvartans* before finally resolving at *Sam*.

Layakārī is sometimes misunderstood as a display of technical skill - a way of making the rhythm more complex. But its deeper purpose is different. The performer who moves through the levels of *Laya* is not departing from the cycle. They are exploring its interior more fully - tracing more intricate paths within the *Āvartan* while remaining oriented, at every moment, toward the *Sam*. However far the elaboration travels, the obligation of return never lifts. Every phrase of *Layakārī* is a small journey from *Sam* and back. Every resolution at *Sam* is a miniature *Laya* - an ending that is simultaneously a new beginning.

This is why *Layakārī* is considered one of the highest arts in the tradition. It is not the ornamentation of the cycle. It is the fullest possible inhabiting of it - the practice through which the performer demonstrates, phrase by phrase, that they understand not just the structure of the *Āvartan* but its nature: a space of departure and return, governed always by the pull of *Sam*.

4.3 Gāyan, Vādana, and Nartana: Three Forms of One Practice

In Hindustāni vocal music, the *Āvartan* is the rhythmic ground within which all melodic expression lives. The *Ā*lāp - the slow, free exploration of the *Rāga* before the composition begins - moves outside the cycle, in the realm of unmeasured time. Its entry into the *Bandish*, the fixed composition set to a *Tāla*, is itself a moment of *Sṛṣṭi*: differentiated, cyclic form arising from an undivided exploration. From that point, the vocalist's *Layakārī* unfolds through *Bol-Bānt* - the distribution of the text across the cycle in varying rhythmic patterns - and through the gradual acceleration from *Vilambita* (slow) through *Madhya* (medium) to *Drut* (fast) *Laya*. The dialogue between vocalist and *Tablā* player - two practitioners following independent paths of elaboration and arriving together at *Sam* - is the musical realisation of *Sam* in its most complete sense.

In instrumental music, the same structure governs. The *Gat* establishes the performer's relationship to the cycle; the *Jod* and *Jhālā* push that relationship toward its limits as the tempo rises and the cycle's internal pulse becomes the music's primary subject. The *Tihāī* - the threefold rhythmic phrase that resolves at *Sam* - is the clearest single demonstration of the cyclic principle at work. It does not merely repeat a phrase three times. It is calculated so that the third repetition lands precisely at *Sam*, releasing the tension of the approach in a moment of complete closure. The *Chakkardār*, the *Tihāī* of *Tihāī*s, nests this principle three times within itself - cycles within cycles, each one governed by the same *Bindu*. Its root word, *Cakra*, is the same as *Kālacakra* - the wheel of time. The terminology is not accidental. The *Chakkardār* is cyclic time made as visible as sound can make it.

In Kathak - the classical dance form most closely integrated with the *Tablā* and vocal traditions - the *Āvartan* is enacted holistically. The dancer’s entire body acts as a single, unified instrument flowing through the cycle. The approach to *Sam* is a continuous physical journey that takes many forms, whether through a delicate phrase of *Abhinaya* (expression), a striking stance, or dynamic rhythmic patterns. For instance, an intricate *Tatkar* (footwork) sequence - or even a subtle shift in gaze - finally resolves at *Sam*, the physical form returns exactly to its generative center.

This arrival is a moment of total physical harmony where sound, movement, and space perfectly unite. It is the ultimate expression of *Saṅgīt*: *Gāyan*, *Vādana*, and *Nartana* converging in the exact same instant, collectively enacting the profound principle of return.

5. Conclusion

This paper began with a single question: why should musical time in India be organised as a cycle? The answer, traced through the sources examined here, is that it could not have been otherwise. Indian thought does not treat cyclicity as a feature that music happened to adopt. It treats cyclicity as the nature of time itself - the fundamental movement through which existence proceeds. *Sṛṣṭi, Sthiti,* and *Laya* are not three events that happen to the world. They are the structure of every moment, at every scale. And the *Āvartan* is that structure made audible.

That this is so is confirmed by something as simple as a single word. *Laya* names both philosophical dissolution and musical pulse - not because the two meanings drifted together by accident, but because the tradition understood both to be expressions of the exact same principle operating at different scales. When Śaṅkarācārya describes *Laya* as the return of the manifest world to its unmanifest source, he is describing the grand, cosmic truth of existence. When Śārṅgadeva names *Laya* a vital breath of *Tāla*, he is describing how that exact same truth is experienced physically, within the intimate span of a rhythm. They are pointing to the same reality from different directions. This convergence is the foundation on which the entire argument of this paper rests. If *Laya* is truly one principle operating in two registers - the cosmic and the musical - then the *Āvartan* is not merely a musical structure that happens to resemble a philosophical idea. It is the philosophical idea itself, brought down from the realm of abstract thought and given a living, audible form.

To accept this convergence is to realize that the internal landscape of the *Āvartan* is not a mechanism for measuring time, but a profound discipline for experiencing it. *Layakārī* ceases to be a mere display of rhythmic complexity; it becomes the embodied practice of navigating existence. Whether tracing the *Āvartan* through the melodic arcs of *Gāyan*, the resonant strokes of *Vādana*, or the somatic geometry of *Nartana*, the artist engages in a single, unified act: exploring the vastness of the manifest world while remaining inextricably tethered to its source.

It is here that the *Ṣaḍja-Sam* simile, with which this paper opened, reaches its ultimate resonance. In Indian aesthetic thought, meaning is not found in linear progression, but in the profound grace of return. Just as *Ṣaḍja* serves as the eternal ground-tone - the silence from which melody emerges and the rest to which it must inevitably fold - *Sam* serves as the absolute *Bindu* of musical time. Both are sites of *Laya*. They mark the threshold where tension dissolves into resolution, and where the conclusion of one cycle serves as the immediate, generative spark for the next.

When a practitioner internalizes the structural withdrawal of the *Khāli* and fully embodies the profound, inevitable return to the exact moment of *Sam*, they move beyond mere technique. They physically inhabit the *Āvartan*, engaging directly with the *Kālacakra* - the cosmic wheel of time. Consequently, the *Āvartan* functions as far more than a metric container for performance. It is an embodied philosophy, rendering the abstract, cyclical nature of existence into a tangible reality, consciously lived through the flesh, breath, and sound of the artist.

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